

REVIEWS

Roslyn Lee Hammers, *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving: Art, Labor, and Technology in Song and Yuan China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, 293 pp.

Ina Asim

[Ina Asim is Associate Professor of Chinese History at the University of Oregon.
Contact: inaasim@uoregon.edu]

Pictures of Tilling and Weaving. Art, Labor, and Technology in Song and Yuan China by Roslyn Hammers gives an analysis of a series of depictions showing scenes of agriculture and sericulture, each one of which is accompanied by a poem. The scenes originated from two painted handscrolls created by an official of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) named Lou Shu 樓璘 (1090-1162). As a sequence, the scrolls and poems show agrarian work processes and the involved technology. At the same time they introduce a political program for ideal governance.

The scrolls gained great prominence as a pictorial representation of successful governance through the ideal balance of gendered labor in which agriculture was pursued by men, and sericulture by women, thus symbolizing the basic pillars of a well-ordered state. In fact, these genre scenes became so prominent that they spawned a series of paintings, stone engravings, and wood-block prints showing labor in rural settings that were collectively named after the title of Lou Shu's scrolls: "Pictures of Tilling and Weaving" (*Gengzhitu* 耕織圖).

In her book Hammers carefully reconstructs and analyzes the scrolls from the earliest extant set of poems dated to 1210 as well as from later copies of the images. Each of the two original scrolls depicted essential work processes: In one scroll 21 individual production scenes were devoted to agriculture. The scroll depicting sericulture consisted of 24 scenes. Each scene was accompanied by a poem of eight lines with five characters to each line, that commented on the corresponding painted scene, and conveyed sentiments associated with the labor conditions at the time. While the poetic texts according to Hammers are historically reliable, the images are not (p. 1). Therefore, the connection between images and texts could only be established based on the plausibility of references in the content of individual poems that relate to pictorial scenes as they were transmitted in later versions of the paintings. This painstaking matching of poetic comments and their elegantly covert allusions with the illustrations is one important contribution of Hammers' book. While later versions of

Tilling and Weaving paintings or wood-block prints abound, their coordination of image and text was often incorrect.

Another important contribution of Hammers' work is that her interpretation of Lou Shu's scrolls reaches beyond the evaluation they have been given in the past. The scrolls unquestionably are a highly valuable documentation of Song technological accomplishments. They have also been widely praised as an educational tool in the hands of the Song officials. Wang Chaosheng characterized them as "the first illustrated popular science manual on agriculture in the world" (Wang 1995, p. 33). So far the comments on social conditions transmitted in the poems had been largely neglected. Hammers justly alerts the reader that only considered in tandem can the viewer of paintings and poems arrive at a full understanding of the impact Lou Shu's work had on his contemporaries and on the production of the many later editions. Recognizing that the scroll successfully conveyed the political message of agriculture and sericulture as the quintessential basis of a flourishing state economy, reproductions of the scenes of *Tilling and Weaving* were commissioned in every dynasty after the Song.

Francesca Bray had first pointed out an additional function of the scrolls: Images of agriculture and sericulture and the labor conditions of the farmers involved in both occupations intended to remind the powerful and the wealthy of Song times that it were the farmers on whose shoulders the production of rice and silk and thus the welfare of the state rested, and that the scrolls therefore depicted an ideal social contract between the ruling and the ruled (Bray 2003, p. 433). In her analysis Hammers takes this observation further: She explains the ideological origins of this contract in the Chinese Classics, in Tang literature and Song paintings. The symbiotic connection between the welfare of the people and political order in the state had been expressed in texts of the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Odes*) and the *Shujing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*). According to Hammers, Lou Shu's contribution consists in his repudiation of this classic social contract, which he replaced with an updated version reflecting conditions during his lifetime. The social contract of antiquity had described mutual responsibilities derived from mutual dependency: the aristocracy provided the stable conditions and protection for the farmers, whose work in agriculture and sericulture sustained the aristocracy as well as the farmers' own families. Lou Shu's revision of this ideal, according to Hammers, saw the Song officials in a new role: rather than being merely the prolonged tax collecting arm of the emperor, they also had the task to care for and instruct the people and act as intermediaries between the local population and the imperial government.

Hammers' book is structured into an introduction, five main chapters, an epilogue and two appendices. It is richly illustrated with images of

excellent quality and details that provide precise references to the corresponding poetic texts.

In her introduction, the author situates the origin of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* in a contrasting context with the poem titled "Seventh Month" from the *Book of Odes*, the classical account of the symbiotic life of farmers and aristocracy under the Zhou. Lou Shu added a government official to the iconography of his scroll, replacing the figure representing the benevolent ruler (or vicariously the responsible aristocratic landlord) shown in visual representations of the "Seventh Month" poem with a new figure of power. This new authority figure was imbued with the ideals of loyalty to the emperor and fairness to his subjects expected from Song scholar-officials. The official, according to Hammers, served as a mediator between the ruler and the people under his supervision. In Lou Shu's scroll the authority figure is presented holding a scale in his hand while commanding the farmers to unload their tax grain into an assigned bin (fig. 5.12, pp. 145, 187). The image leaves Lou Shu's intention open to interpretation. The viewer has to decide whether a productive interaction between overseer and subjects or the exploitation of dependent peasants is depicted here. Hammers deducts from the extant imagery that Lou Shu subscribed to the Song novelty version of the social contract between social classes, that low-ranking officials acted as intermediaries between the imperial bureaucracy and commoners. Hammers sees the *Tilling and Weaving* scrolls as the expression of a joint effort by emperor, bureaucrats, and commoners to work towards the ideal society as envisioned by Wang Anshi (1021-1086) and the reformers who supported him (p. 6). Her summarizing statement in the "Introduction" that the pictorial inclusion of the figure of a government official as mediator between the imperial government and the farmers makes *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* into the "visual attestation to the scholar-officials' elevation to a place of power and importance in the imperial echelon" (p. 7) seems somewhat exaggerated, when the poem by Lou Shu that accompanies the scene with the government official is evaluated carefully (see below). That the Yuan emperors appropriated the Song model of patronage for *Tilling and Weaving* imagery may be proof of their interest in maximizing production to achieve maximum tax profit. Hammers' book offers substantial guidance in the interpretation of the political and cultural context, such as the ways in which genre paintings reflect the new policies of the Song, as well as the new self-conception of local officials during the Song and subsequent dynasties.

It is in the surviving poems, which followed the images on the scrolls, that we hear Lou Shu's critical voice. His critique allows us to make assumptions about his intentions: He reprimands the wasteful life of landlords who consume the grain and silk (*Tilling Poem* 20, p. 186), a

reference to the “Seventh Month” poem and its lost ideals, and laments about the poverty the farmers had to endure despite their hard labor, clearly a critique of Song conditions

Lou Shu was a descendant of a *jinshi* of the year 1053: his great-grandfather Lou Yu 樓郁 had been invited in 1047 by the Song reformer – and later chancellor – Wang Anshi 王安石 to teach at the prefectural school in his jurisdiction. He was also the grandson and son of an official: his father, Lou Yi 樓異 received the *jinshi* degree in 1085. Inspired by the values of his forefathers Lou Shu seems to have intended to capture in his paintings and poems the concerns of responsible officials. For this reason, he reminded the wealthy and powerful viewers of the scrolls that they ought to understand what toil was required for the production of tax grain and tax cloth. As Hammers rightly points out, the educational value of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* appealed to Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127-1162) when the scrolls were presented to him.

The author devotes the first chapter of her book to the reconstruction of the scenes in Lou Shu’s now lost original scroll. In a careful comparison of various pictorial sources the author explores their iconographical relation to Lou Shu’s original composition, which can be mapped from the poems that accompanied each of the scenes in his scroll, though the placement of the poems in the original scroll – either after each pictorial scene or mounted as a colophon – remains unclear. The first option may explain the inconsistencies in the sequence of poems and images in the various copies of the scroll.

In the second chapter Hammers contextualizes the images and related poems with the role of the Song officials and the reforms of the Song. She makes us aware of discrepancies between image and text, which reveal that the ideal as Lou Shu may have associated it with the reforms initiated by Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 and Wang Anshi was no longer pursued by the various levels of the bureaucracy in charge of tax collection at the time when Lou Shu painted his scrolls. Hammers uses the scene titled “Entering the Granary” to demonstrate how Lou’s depiction of the ideal and his critique of the reality are divided between image and text: While the painted scene shows the delivery of grain to the granary by farmers, the respective poem expresses concern about the high level of taxation that leaves a farmer’s famished son crying from hunger pains. She concludes that “the visual images of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* do not as a rule illustrate the poems’ emotional content or make impassioned pleas against abusive practices. The narrative strategy of the scroll, then, is to have text and image, poetry and painting positioned in counterpoint, rather than as a complement, to one another” (p. 53). This reading is somewhat at odds with her interpretation of Lou Shu’s work as a claim of empathy for the farmers as outlined in her introduction. She interprets the figure at the

center of the scene, a clerk evidently in charge of overseeing the delivery of the tax grain, as a “benevolent rural clerk,” a clear contradiction between image and text since Lou Shu laments in the poem that the farmers are pressed for high amounts of tax payments, incessant demands for taxes-in-kind, fueled by the tax officials’ primary concern of fulfillment of the tax quota. Where Hammers sees “a just clerk,” one might see instead an example of a demanding authority figure in charge of the granary, fulfilling demands of the government at the cost of the rural population. It corresponds with the author’s reading of a scene of silk production work, which she interprets as Lou Shu’s endorsement of a strong presence of government officials (p. 57). The author concludes “Lou Shu emphasizes talent over virtue” (p. 56)—as opposed to Sima Guang 司馬光 who set an official’s virtue higher than his talent. Hammers sees Lou Shu’s ideal in line with Wang Anshi’s demand that officials should be well versed in mathematics, accounting, and other practical matters beyond the knowledge of refined poetry. This interpretation then endorses a decisive hand of government officials, carefully weighing necessities of the government against empathy with the people.

A further handscroll is introduced in chapter three. This scroll, attributed to Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (act. 2nd half of the 12th cent.), which bears an inscription by Emperor Gaozong, is the pictorial rendering of the “Seventh Month” poem of the *Book of Odes*. According to Hammers, the fact that Gaozong commissioned this scroll indicates his attempt to align himself with the ideals of a benevolent aristocracy, a turn away from the ideals proposed by Lou Shu. Hammers claims that Lou Shu expressed “a repudiation of the interpretation of classical Zhou society presented in the *Seventh Month*” (p. 69). Yet at the same time we learn that there had been a tradition of imperial commissions of *Seventh Month* depictions since the fourth century. Gaozong established an academic painting bureau in the Southern capital Lin’an (Hangzhou). Under the circumstances it doesn’t come as a surprise that he commissioned a painting aligning him with a model ruler of antiquity and thus continuing a time-honored tradition.

It is obvious that a new social reality was envisioned by Song progressives like Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, Fan Zhongyan, Su Che 蘇轍, and Wang Anshi, which is reflected in their respective reinterpretations of the “Seventh Month” poem. They saw the description of the toils of farmers as a reminder for the ruler of his responsibilities towards his subjects, turning away from a wasteful aristocracy, including the famous Duke of Zhou, who had been removed from the imperial Confucius temple at the end of the Tang (p. 84). The *Seventh Month* painting and the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* thus came to belong to the same category of painting in support of a society that gave political weight to the work of the farmers.

Chapter Four contextualizes the style of Lou Shu's *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* in comparison with other paintings concerned with social conditions. Hammers ties in comments by Lou Shu's descendants into the discussion of the 'mission' (p. 118) of the scrolls.

An informative graph (p. 102) presents the genealogy of the compared paintings with agrarian topics that influenced or referenced each other with regard to style and content. Hammers draws an instructive analogy between painting style elements such as the free (*shu* 疏) and detailed (*mi* 密) styles which are associated with the political camps of amateur scholarly painters and artisanal painters respectively. Lou Shu's scrolls thus associate him with the camp of politically progressive literati not only by content but also through their style of detailed brushwork. This visual identification added to their iconic character and ultimately was more important than the correct depiction of the technology or work process they showed (p. 111).

But Hammers alerts the reader that the clear intention to support political reform initiated by Lou Shu with his scrolls was not necessarily followed by the later paintings. Hammers states that Emperor Ningzong's (r. 1194-1224) "adaptation of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* [by Lou Shu] thus neutralizes the criticism they contained by thoroughly reworking them. ... The painting ... makes agrarian labor look attractive" (p. 111-112).

In the last chapter Hammers traces the use of the theme of agrarian work under Mongol rule. She shows convincingly that the Song vision of the ideal of mutual responsibilities between social classes was lost. This vision was replaced by genre scenes of working individuals and by illustrations of technical implements used in agricultural and sericultural production processes. The most important work in this context is the famous *Book on Agriculture* (*Nongshu* 農書; preface 1303) by Wang Zhen 王禎 (fl. 1290-1333). Wang incorporated Lou Shu's poems in his work, indicating that he had in mind the improvement of work conditions through strengthening the position of local clerks and officials as mediators between the people and the Yuan government. In Wang's view educated men should continue to instruct the people although the state examinations had been eliminated by the Mongols.

Three further paintings and their respective poems are represented within their time specific context in the Yuan Dynasty: The first is a scroll from the brush of court painter Yang Shuqian 楊叔謙 (n.d.), titled *Nongsangtu* 農桑圖 (*Pictures of Farming and Mulberry Trees*). The images are matched with poems by the official Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322) and were created in the style of Lou Shu.

The second painting under consideration is titled *Gengjiatu* 耕稼圖 (*Pictures of Agricultural Work*). It shows the last nine scenes from Lou Shu's

original scroll and is from the hand of an anonymous painter with an inscription by a Mongolian named Hugechi or Qugechi 忽歌赤.

The third painting is from the hand of Wang Meng 王蒙 (c. 1308-1385), a grandson of Zhao Mengfu. It is titled *Gukou chungeng tu* 谷口春耕圖 ("Spring Tilling in the Gorge," and depicts farming scenes in a secluded valley in the mountains.

The concluding epilogue gives an overview of the use of genre paintings with the topic of agriculture and sericulture in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Roslyn Hammers shows that the topic was no longer a focus for scholars who painted. Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) famously sent the genre paintings with their detailed depictions of work scenes or drawings of technological devices on a popularity tailspin. The aesthetics of landscapes as well as paintings of scholarly gatherings in gardens replaced the topic of timely methods and innovative technology in agriculture, which now illustrated manuals on farming and other practices. The relevant chapters in Song Yingxing's 宋應星 (1587-1666) *Tiangong Kaiwu* 天工開物 (*The Exploitation of the Works of Nature*; publ. 1637) should have been mentioned here.

Only when the Qing emperors Kangxi (r. 1661-1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723-1735), and Qianlong (r. 1735-1796) each commissioned new sets of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving*, general interest in the genre was revived and with it the age-old phrase "men plough, women weave" with its appeal to the Confucian ideal of a well-ordered world based on gender-division and a hierarchically structured society led by a benevolent ruler. The imagery of such an ideal society proliferated and the didactic iconography could later be found as the cherished décor of everyday objects in multiple materials, including products such as porcelain and wallpapers made for export to Europe.

The appendices contain the essential visual and textual sources on which Hammers' work is based. Appendix A contains a copy of the forty-five scenes of the *Tilling and Weaving* scrolls from the hand of Cheng Qi 程棨 (act. c. 1275). Appendix B presents eight translations of relevant documents that reflect the historical reception of Lou Shu's paintings and poems and illuminates the concerns of Song thinkers regarding the potential of social strife caused by imbalances in society. Three of the texts are by members of Lou Shu's family, the remaining five by prominent men such as the poet Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002-1060), the Song chancellor Wang Anshi, scholar and official Dai Baiyuan (1244-1310), painter Zhao Mengfu, and an anonymous painter whose painting includes a colophon by the Yuan official Qugechi). The texts document the changes that the political ideology and the related genre paintings underwent through time.

Roslyn Hammers' work is an instructive and innovative desideratum: Her close reading of the poems by Lou Shu and her careful reconstruction

of the sequence of handscroll scenes from a variety of later copies and other images with the topic of agriculture and sericulture adds the important art-historical perspective to previous considerations by scholars of the history of science and technology in China.

Her exploration of images and texts enriches the study of the ancient Chinese political and cultural program dedicated to the instruction on how to achieve a peaceful and balanced society as it was projected into high antiquity. Her book illustrates comprehensively the genealogy of extant *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* and their transmission of the ideal of mutual responsibility of ruler and people.

In addition to her analysis of content and style of the selected art works, the author also provides an impressive collection of carefully translated texts. These texts either served as the intellectual inspiration for the genre or were added to the images themselves complementing the didactic imagery with political aspirations mantled in poetic verse.

Hammers' work is a substantial and unique contribution to our understanding of the ways in which iconographic semantics were used for the promotion of political ideals, the manipulation of historical remembrance, as well as the instruction in technological progress.

References

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